

Digital Humanities is No Object.

Grant Glass, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Prepared for MLA 2019, Session 89: What do we teach when we teach DH?

Provocation:

What are the expectations concerning what students produce in a DH classroom? Taking into consideration the intersections of student labor and teaching outcomes while emphasizing process and critical thinking, teaching DH in a writing classroom often times results in prototyping, but not producing. To what extent should work done in the classroom model scholarship produced by DH professionals?

In spring of 2018, I had the opportunity to teach a discipline specific writing class instead of the University's standard writing across the disciplines class, which brought me both excitement and despair, since the discipline was Digital Humanities. I had just completed my master's degree in Digital Humanities from King's College London not more than a year earlier and was filled with optimism for the potential DH could bring to my scholarship and teaching. The writing class was a result of a proposed course I had made a year earlier in the hopes that another, more tenured instructor might teach it and that I could learn from them.

I was wrong. As the teaching contracts were distributed, I learned that I would be the primary instructor for writing in the digital humanities. Initially, my syllabus was more DH than writing, which was swiftly rejected by the writing program. This first rejection sent me down a road of questioning and doubt. "I am qualified to teach a digital humanities course?"—was on the forefront of my mind. Ryan Cordell's "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities" became a helpful guide to quelling my fears. Specifically, Cordell's suggestion to "start small" and to "scaffold everything" became my framework and with a little work, the course became centered

around exploring the intersections between humanities and data by learning about key methods in Digital Humanities and the types of composition and writing that result from it.

The focus on composition assisted in syllabus approval, but along the way I needed to teach the key methods of Digital Humanities, which was easier in theory than in practice. And so, the phrase, “easier in theory than in practice” became our class mantra. Also, I took Diane’s suggestion “that the traditional model of one instructor for a course doesn’t work in DH”¹ to heart and invited different librarians, faculty members, graduate students, and a few industry speakers to talk about what DH meant to them and how they worked within the discipline. Since I was merely an “expert” in textual analysis and there is a much wider array of DH methods spanning from GIS to digital archives, the speakers helped illustrate the practice of DH, which only support from the library made it possible.

As my *Writing in Digital Humanities* class concluded, a question from Timothy Brennan in his Higher Education Article sprang to mind, “what exactly have the digital humanities accomplished?” Courses call for concrete outcomes, and the students wanted complex visualizations and algorithms to take home to show their parents; however, they were leaving with fewer “things” and more experiences. Prototypes, reflections, and literature reviews filled their final portfolios, but a glaring omission was a concrete collaborative or individual project. Within the bounds of the University writing program, my class was a success; students learned to develop writing strategies, awareness, and self-assessment skills to help them confidently approach future writing challenges that they will encounter in their academic and professional lives at UNC and beyond. But somehow, I felt like something was missing. They didn’t have anything they could concretely point to that made them feel like Digital Humanists. But I wasn’t teaching Digital Humanists or was I? Often times in writing programs like UNC,

¹ <http://dianejakacki.net/how-we-teach-digital-humanities-pedagogy-in-an-imperfect-world/>

the students engage in “real life” genres and have to perform the role as a scholar in order to master the genre.

Now, if we accept Mathew Kirschenbaum’s “tactical” valence to DH, then my class could be seen as a failure, by which I mean the class relies on teaching the methodology of DH, not its practice. Still, there is value in questions and methods. In light of Spencer D.C. Keralis’ contribution to *Disrupting Digital Humanities*, appropriately titled *Disrupting Labor in Digital Humanities; or, The Classroom Is Not Your Crowd* and Mariam Posner’s “Student Collaborator’s Bill of Rights”² I was careful about student labor in the classroom, but I wanted to offer the students an opportunity to create their own projects and to engage in original scholarly work. But quickly realized in the context of the class and learning outcomes this was not possible. As someone who studied in a DH department, these concerns seemed even more pressing. Am I qualified to teach DH if I fail to create a significant project during my own degree?³

My work for the William Blake Archive, one of the oldest digital humanities projects seemed to qualify me, but I did not have a project of my own, yet. Through that experience, I have learned that DH is more often than not, a collaborative endeavor and while I did not help to create the William Blake Archive, I had helped redesign and publish material on the site. But I was compensated financially for my time and effort, for which my students would not be. The question of whether or not that CV line for the students is equal to the effort, is in my experience, not worth it.

² <https://humtech.ucla.edu/news/a-student-collaborators-bill-of-rights/>

³ My Thesis involved a poorly constructed Python script that web-scraped DHQ and then found word collocations of theory to try to better understand how DH uses theory.

In my own scholarship I was dealing with questions of hack and yack, realizing that software comes and goes but thinking about how humanities methods help us understand the digital world seems to accomplish something. In my teaching, I felt the pressure to create something tactile, but failed to realize that my students—the journalism majors, computer scientists, and the biological science majors did not want to be digital humanists. I quickly realized that in the face of student labor, if they were to complete a major project they would have to produce the same types of writing than their non-DH counterparts in addition to this. Requiring a tactile project often requires additional unseen student labor and faculty guidance, which as a graduate instructor seemed impossible given the demands of the graduate program. And yet, my students and myself desired a project with gleaming visualizations that we could show to University administrators, parents, and hiring committees.

But why did this desire exist? As, Alexander Galloway explains in *Protocol*, objects (like visualizations) in the modern era tend to be aestheticized, and through this process, to turn into “autonomous, living entities” (88). They then wield power over scholars who fetishize them not for what they are but what they represent. But what does a DH project actually represent?

DH represents a process of becoming—a project, a thought, or a question. We often want something tactile to help us anchor our teaching and research, but as other scholars like Brian, Diane, Miriam, and Ryan have shown me we can learn more from process and reflection than we ever do by producing. I need to embody this concept better in order to stop the questions of qualification and to start to assemble my answer to “What do we teach when we teach DH?” My answer needed to include writing as well, since this was in fact a writing course. DH became of way of thinking for our class. The student’s first prompt was *some things wrong with the*

internet, which helped me teach writing while showing the promise of a DH perspective, trying to be as inclusive as I could in defining DH.

Rather than focusing on the aesthetics and marketing of fancy visualizations, I realized that I needed to share my experiences and questions of technology in the classroom. And I need to teach critical thinking skills as they relate to digital technology and DH methods without teaching the skills to create digital humanities projects. Rather than creating more websites and visualizations, we need to be teaching the thought processes that lead to the questions which arise out of DH humanities scholarship, like how can we make text more accessible to the public? The next generation of digital humanists will need to stop worrying about visualizations and projects, but make sure that they focus on process. Because the digital world is always going to be changing and ahead of academia. And because so many of us are always looking for validation, we need to not forget what brought us to DH, it wasn't the project, but the question that arose from the critical thinking skills we learned from our amazing teachers. When we teach DH, we are teaching the process and the questions that lead to a project, not the skills to build a DH project. Because DH is no object.

Works Cited:

Brennan, Timothy. "The Digital-Humanities Bust." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2017) *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2018.

Cordell, Ryan. "How not to teach digital Humanities." *ryancordell.org [blog]* (1 February 2015) Available at: <http://ryancordell.org/teaching/how-not-to-teach-digital-humanities> (2015).

Galloway, Alexander R. *Protocol: How control exists after decentralization*. MIT press, (2004).

Kirschenbaum, Matthew. "Digital humanities as/is a tactical term." *Debates in the digital humanities* (2012): 415-428.

Keralis, Spencer D.C. "Disrupting Labor in Digital Humanities; or, The Classroom Is Not Your Crowd." In *Disrupting The Digital Humanities*. Ed. Kim, Dorothy, and Jesse Stommel. Punctum Books, (2018).